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SUBJECT: COCA CULTIVATION IN COLOMBIAN NATIONAL PARKS

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The GOC National Parks Unit (NPU) insists that coca -- despite its presence in 15 parks -- is less of a concern than invasion of licit crops and that manual eradication is effective at controlling cultivation. Coca exists in an estimated 30 percent of parks, which make up 11 percent of Colombia's territory, with illegal communities present in more than half. The UN estimates that the amount of coca in parks numbers has decreased over the last few years, but many local experts are skeptical of those numbers and are concerned about continued progress unless the NPU increases its analysis and prioritization of the issue. Law enforcement presence is minimal. The NPU says its limited resources prevent it from addressing underlying social issues, specifically land reform, that intertwine with parks management. The NPU promotes strategies for sustainable licit agriculture, but until the GOC allocates more resources to the NPU, its focus will remain on conservation strategies and not on providing alternative economic opportunities for local communities. USAID Colombia has a USD 11 million protected areas program, targeted at strengthening NPU capabilities. END SUMMARY.

Coca A Concern, But Not The Priority

¶2. (SBU) National Parks Director Julia Miranda told us that NPU regards coca as any other illicit crop and that it is "very far from being the NPU's main problem," noting that coca exists in less than 1 percent of total parks territory. She added that the GOC strategy is focused on manual eradication, involving both voluntary and forced eradication. The voluntary program entails local inhabitants destroying their coca plots in exchange for being given land outside park limits. Miranda displayed 2009 UN figures estimating that coca inside parks decreased from 6,100 to 3,445 hectares during 2005-2008 (NOTE: While cultivation is down, experts point out that parks containing coca increased during the same timeframe, from 12-15. The hectare reduction is principally the result of a 54 percent decrease in one park, Sierra La Macarena, which has been a GOC and USG priority consolidation and eradication area. END NOTE.) Overall, coca production increased in 9 parks in 2008 and declined in 5, with parks in the departments of Guaviare, Meta and Antioquia containing the most coca.

Criticism: Lack Of Focus On Coca Short-Sighted

¶3. (SBU) Miranda was emphatic in insisting that the USG/GOC eradication program, including spray, did not lead to increased cultivation in parks. Not all observers agree. Carlos Ramirez, director of environmental NGO Tropenbos, criticized the NPU for its lack of research regarding issues such as the involvement of paramilitary and guerrilla groups

in coca cultivation and processing, the effects of spray on nearby parks, and the make-up of communities inhabiting parks. Ramirez said the NPU had no concrete sense as to whether or not park inhabitants were originally from park territories, or moved into the areas to exploit the territories' unique status. World Wildlife Foundation Advisor Emilio Rodriguez added that "we all know fumigation programs are directly linked to the movement of many communities and coca growing to parks, but have no specific numbers to point to." Miranda said NPU resource limitations prevented it from having such data.

Limited Enforcement Capability

14. (SBU) NPU Technical Director Gisela Paredes said the NPU has only 400 officials to manage Colombia's parks, which total 11 percent of territorial Colombia. Despite a dramatic budget increase in recent years (reftel), the NPU's resources remain limited, leaving it dependent on the Colombian National Police (CNP) for law enforcement. (Note: Miranda said financing secured by the government of Ireland in 2008 now ensured that NPU had at least 4 officials or contractors in each park. END NOTE.)

15. (SBU) The Coordinator for CNP's Environmental Unit Miguel Tunjano said the CNP only has a physical presence in two parks -- La Macarena and Sierra Nevada -- and does not have the resources or manpower to expand presence. Local police are responsible for managing the rest of the parks, even though they sometimes reside hours away from the nearest CNP outpost. While military installations also exist near the majority of parks, systematic patrols occur only in the handful of parks developed for international tourism. Tunjano said unlike the U.S. system, park officials do not have law enforcement authority.

Parks: Social Problems Toughest To Tackle

16. (SBU) Miranda said Colombia's fundamental park challenge involved providing land to and relocating these communities, as well as restoring environmental damage caused by licit crops. The NPU estimates that 48,000 indigenous and Afro-Colombian families legally inhabit 18 of the country's 54 parks and protected areas. Additional peasant communities, however, are illegally present in 80 percent of those areas. (NOTE: Over 25 percent of indigenous and Afro-Colombian reserves overlap with parks and while those communities have the right to live there, they are required to consult with environmental authorities before economically exploiting park resources. Non-indigenous or non-Afro communities are considered illegal. The GOC's policy is to relocate these peasant communities. END NOTE.) Ramirez said the indigenous have an expression, "we went to sleep in our land and woke up in a national park."

Environmental Effects Far-Reaching

17. (SBU) The adverse environmental effects of coca growing and processing are extensive: chemical dumping, deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and biodiversity loss. However, coca growing and related activities in the cocaine processing chain are not the only threats to the biodiversity of parks. For Miranda, the environmental effects of cattle ranching and other licit cultivation practices are more detrimental to the environment than coca, highlighting that increased deforestation caused by those activities is "devastating" the parks. Aerial eradication is not permitted in national parks -- authorization to spray in Macarena in 2006, occasioned by the deaths of manual eradicators, generated a huge controversy and has since been revoked. Paredes added that the GOC opposed aerial eradication in parks not only because of alleged environmental effects of spraying, but also because it would not address the underlying causes -- principally lack of land -- of coca cultivation. She said if the GOC allows

spraying, the communities will "simply move to another area of the park."

Plans for Way Forward -- Sustainable Practice Within Parks

¶8. (SBU) Rodriguez said the NPU must learn how to make environmental conservation coincide with traditional indigenous life. Presently the NPU has signed agreements with five park communities, helping them design strategies for sustainable cultivation. Paredes said the NPU hopes to develop these agreements in all parks but does not have a timeline for their completion. The NPU often complains that it is forced to address issues such as agricultural reform and access to credit, without having the appropriate budget and policy authority to make needed reforms.

¶9. (SBU) USAID Colombia supports a USD 11 million protected areas program designed to reduce the threats to biodiversity and climate change in Colombia's protected areas by working with the NPU to improve environmental governance and promote environmentally sustainable livelihoods for parks' communities. Strengthening environmental governance not only preserves and contributes to the long-term environmental sustainability of Colombia's natural resources and biodiversity wealth, but also improves security and leads to the stabilization and consolidation of a permanent state presence with large amounts of environmentally-sensitive, but traditionally weakly-governed areas.

Comment: Treating Coca Like Yuca, A Sustainable Policy?

¶10. (SBU) Both legal (indigenous/Afro-Colombian) and illegal (peasant) communities have historically lived in areas that are present-day parks. The strict conservation strategies of the parks frequently prohibit the communities from legally exploiting the areas' natural resources, labeling many communities as "illegal" without rights to government services such as loans or technology transfer programs. Thus, even though coca numbers are down, several local experts are concerned that the GOC's strict environmental legislation and lack of prioritization of coca eradication may increasingly force park dwellers to turn to coca. Miranda insists that manual eradication has been a huge success, and decreasing coca cultivation in parks supports her statement, but time will tell if that strategy alone is enough to keep coca numbers down.

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